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ABSTRACT

This paper, presented at the eighteenth annual convention of the International Reading Association, identifies the problems that reading may create in teaching social studies from kindergarten through grade twelve. Three alternatives are suggested for use when reading becomes difficult: (1) change the reading level of the material, (2) change the method of teaching, or (3) change the teacher in the classroom. Comparisons are made among these alternatives for the primary and intermediate grade levels as well as for the junior and senior high school levels. Research shows that some popular ideas, such as changing the readability level, may not have much effect on student comprehension. The main point, in the author's opinion, is to make people aware of the fact that reading plays a very important, and often drastic, role in the teaching of social studies, but there are ways to get around the problems that reading may create. (WR)

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Reading as It Relates to the Teaching of Social Studies:

A Social Studies Teacher's Point of View

Session: Reading in the Content Area

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Some people believe that the time will soon come when, because of the advances being made in electronics, the textbook will no longer be used. However, reading has some advantages that other media do not have which will most likely insure its existence for a long time. Preston (31) stated it as follows: "Reading has the power to carry the child further and deeper, in a given time unit, than any other educational medium. Moreover, he can analyze more thoroughly what he reads than what he hears from teachers or in discussion, or sees in films or in television. A passage in a book can be reread as and when needed by the child; he can compare passages for corroboration or to check seeming inconsistencies; he can stop for reflection when he wishes; he can often choose a time for reading that will fit in with his mood or personal needs; he can carry books around with him and can take school books home."

Disagreement usually centers around the following two arguments. If the material is written at a reading level which is too easy for the student the content and the concepts will be destroyed. Secondly, if the reading level is too difficult the students will not be able to understand the content or concept. The question is, if either of these

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arguments is correct, which one is it?

The evidence appears to be in favor of the argument which states that the reading level of the social studies textbooks has to be made easier so that the students will at least have a chance to try to comprehend the subject.

Haffner (10) after studying 42 social studies textbooks, concluded that they contained "excessive" vocabulary loads and concept burdens; therefore, they proved to be inappropriate for the intended reader's use.

The prime factor in subject matter achievement is vocabulary, according to the 1957 study by Townsend (36).

Reading is an important learning tool and research shows reading has an effect on the learning of social studies in five important ways: the readability level of social studies textbooks is too high for most children; the concept load in the typical social studies textbook is too great; too many indefinite terms are consistently being used; reading skills that apply to social studies are not typically taught in social studies; and teachers are not prepared to teach reading in the social studies. These five factors have had a great deal to do with the fact that social studies is not held in great favor by students and/or teachers.

RANKING OF SOCIAL STUDIES

Studies by Chase and Wilson (5), Curry (6), Herman (13), Holmes (14), and Rice (32) have confirmed the fact that when students rate social studies with other subjects, it is usually ranked at or near the

bottom. In fact, Jersild (16) found that at all grade levels social studies is unpopular with pupils. Ironically, however, when asked what topics they would most like to know more about, they mentioned social studies related subjects more than any other. Jersild concluded that the teaching methods rather than the subject matter itself might be the cause for the attitude. Johnson (19), in a survey of 158 elementary school teachers in five Florida counties, found that less than half (71 of 158) liked teaching social studies, and only 75 of the 158 teachers regularly taught social studies.

READABILITY

One of the problems faced by educators is ascertaining whether or not students can read and comprehend instructional material. A difficulty involved with this problem is emphasized by Karlin's statement, "Probably twenty to forty percent of our high school population is reading below grade level norms." (20) If instruction for students is based on printed materials, those materials should be understandable to the reader. Support for this statement is given by Bormuth who says, "But materials can have little educational value if they are written in a language so complex and obscure that children cannot understand the content." (3) Instruction which is based on materials at the students' frustration level is not only of little academic value, but it may also produce an educational environment most negative in its effect on optimum realization of students' potential.

Regarding the readability level of textbooks, Johnson (19) reported that after evaluating 41 social studies textbooks that none of the texts

were written for the below average student, and only some were written for the average student. Seventy-five of the 130 readability levels obtained in this study were above the designated grade level. In 1973, Johnson (20) reconfirmed these findings with an evaluation of 68 new elementary social studies textbooks and concluded that when the readability level is ignored, it results in texts whose vocabulary and concept levels are inappropriate for most intended readers.

Is the readability level of textual materials that important? If the texts are written at a high readability level will it affect the students who are charged to read the material?

Research data indicate that the adjustment of quantitative factors in language structure may not enhance the comprehensibility of written material. Findings reported by Nolte (28) and Geyer (8) indicate that adjustment of readability variables through application of readability formulas may not result in improved comprehension of that material.

If using very simple language would assure comprehension, then people would have little trouble understanding such statements as, "all men are created equal," "to be free means that you can do what you want" or "to be or not to be, that is the question." Comprehension takes more than only using words on the Dolch List of 150 words.

There has also been a great deal of discussion about the validity of readability levels of texts. In 1968, Allbaugh (1), after studying the effect of test passages computed in three grade levels and administered to students in grades four through eight, that after performance decreased with the increase of the tested level of difficulty, that the

Dale-Chall Formula is valid for appraising the readability levels of social studies materials.

One of the arguments used against the use of readability scales today is that they are out of date and based upon word lists that were created 20, 30, or 40 years ago which makes them too old to be valid. A recent study has shown that the basic word lists, whether created today or years ago have a great deal in common and discounts some of this argument.

In a study by Lowe and Folman (25) it was found that the first 150 words of the Dolch Basic Word List were contained in seven other basic vocabulary lists. In comparing the words to three studies of basal readers by Harris (11), Johnson and Barrett (18), and Taylor (35), the words were found at the pre-primer, primer, first and second grade levels. Most of the words occurred at the first three levels. When the Dolch first 150 words were compared to studies of adult materials (23), school materials for grades three through nine (4), third grade lists (29), a list combining the adult list with a list derived from the oral vocabulary of children (17) it was found that all the words were found to be under the rubric of "Basic, Most Common, or Most Frequently Occurring." The intercorrelations between the Dolch words and the four other word frequency studies were all very high ($R = .81$ to $.99$) and all were significant beyond the $.001$ level. The authors concluded that the Dolch List was still useful, and that the most common words in our language are common at any level, grade one through educated adult levels, and that the first 150 words of the

Dolch List would be useful at any level, K-adult.

With the readability level calculated in isolation from the reader, the following statement by Klare appears to evaluate appropriate application of the results of readability formulas when he states, "If formulas are thought of as efficient predictors of difficulty, more accurate in prediction than individual writers most of the time, that is all that should be expected." (22)

Preston (30) states that beginning in fourth grade, most pupils can decode almost any word. Two kinds of words cause difficulty: words whose meanings are unknown or only vaguely known; and words, familiar or unfamiliar, which have technical meanings.

Once the children have mastered the skill of decoding, the problem is to enlarge their meaningful vocabulary and understanding of concepts rather than to concentrate on decoding skills.

CONCEPT LOAD

In an analysis of social studies-reading research, Fay (7) inferred that in social studies instruction today a far too difficult concept load is presented much too fast. Teachers must limit the number of topics they require to be covered.

Reading and study skills, and concepts necessary to the understanding of social studies, need to be taught, and are taught more effectively within the framework of the social studies curriculum than when presented in isolation.

The concept load in social studies textbooks is staggering in itself, but the problem is multiplied by the overuse of quantitative

concepts. After investigating second grade textbooks, Lyda and Robinson (26) reported that children of above average intelligence understood three-fourths of the quantitative concepts, average children understood a little less than half of the concepts, and below average children understood less than a fourth of the concepts.

INDEFINITE TERMS

Jarolimek and Foster (15), Arnsdorf (2) and Gill (9) have investigated the use of indefinite references of time and/or space and all conclude there are too many of them and that they cause students difficulty in social studies comprehension.

READING SKILLS

Another reason often heard for the problem caused by reading in the social studies is that teachers do not teach enough skills in the social studies that are related to reading and social studies. Many studies have been done on this topic and the results are usually the same: some reading skills can be better taught during social studies than during reading.

In 1961, Herber (12) stated that the best place to learn how to read social studies is in the social studies classroom, and the best person to develop social studies concepts and vocabulary skills is the social studies teacher. Furthermore, he continued (although some people disagree), if students are properly prepared they will be able to read with understanding any material they have to read. Preparation

should include motivation, vocabulary building, concept development, anticipation and reading of directions.

Does reading ability really matter in social studies? In 1950, Fay (7) confirmed that of the five reading skills necessary for superior reading, none appeared really vital to achievement in math, two seemed to be necessary for achievement in science, but four of the five seemed to be necessary to achieve success in social studies.

Fay (7) also stated the vocabulary is not only too extensive but there are too many difficult proper names and terms. He recommended that comprehension help be given to social studies students, with special instruction in such skills as skimming, evaluating and interpreting.

Robinson (33) stated that students should be given frequent practice in two kinds of reading skills that are important to the social studies. These are reading comprehension skills which include using experience or knowledge, defining the problem, grasping main ideas, reading for details, making inferences, drawing conclusions, comparing ideas, and understanding ideas; and reference skills which include selecting source material, using alphabetical order, locating specific information, using index and table of contents and guide words, and selecting appropriate meaning of words in the dictionary.

Michaels (27) stated, after studying 186 college preparatory eleventh graders, that the reading skills needed and the reading skills developed depended upon the manner in which the subject was presented by the teacher. His study confirmed what many people have believed

for a long time, that different skills are necessary for different teaching methods.

TEACHER PREPARATION

Almost every elementary teacher that has been at a gathering, social or professional where secondary teachers have also attended has heard something similar to, "why don't you elementary teachers teach kids to read before sending them to us?" A problem of misunderstanding exists here which has to be pointed out to teachers above the elementary level.

The learning of how to read does not stop at the end of sixth grade.

One advantage elementary teachers have over the junior and senior high school teachers is that reading in elementary social studies usually takes place in the classroom while in the higher grades social studies reading is most often done outside the classroom. Therefore, the elementary teacher is in a better position to teach those reading skills necessary for comprehension in social studies and to identify other skills that the students may need.

In 1951, after studying 1012 Negro ninth and twelfth grade students in Florida, Georgia and Alabama, and finding that the average student was three to five grades below grade placement in reading level, Lee (24) concluded that the content area teacher should be especially competent in the setting of achievable goals for the students and should provide guidance in the achievement of them. He also suggested training for subject-matter teachers in reading testing,

diagnosis and individualized instruction, all of which would lead to school-wide reading programs.

Inservice training has to be conducted so that teachers will be kept up-to-date on what is happening in the world of reading and social studies.

SUGGESTIONS FOR TEACHERS

All teachers of social studies should attempt to avoid having students reach the frustration level by making sure that when the teacher is present the students ought to know 75 percent of the ideas in the passage and 90 percent of the vocabulary. Higher limits are required when the students are reading independently. Much frustration can be eliminated if social studies teachers will:

1. Show primary students that reading is important and words convey meaning by recording their speech on the chalkboard and reading it to them. Also include some new words to increase their listening and reading vocabulary.
2. Avoid around-the-room oral reading. It is usually too long, too boring, and students should never have to read aloud material they are reading for the first time.
3. Restrict oral reading for specific purposes and only to specific passages. Then discuss what was read and ask questions that call for more than a yes or no answer. Use provocative and searching questions.
4. When difficult concepts have to be taught or expanded, provide the students with several examples, many of which are

non-reading experiences.

5. Avoid indefinite terms whenever possible. Give concrete examples or use pictures or other media to get the idea across.
6. In social studies, work on enlarging the meaningful vocabulary of students. Concentrate on sight vocabulary and NOT on skills that develop decoding techniques.
7. If a skill is found to be lacking, take the time to teach it, in reading or in the social studies class.
8. Avoid isolated word drill because when this is done there is very little retention. Discuss specific meanings of words by using them in the context in which they will appear in the written material.
9. Easy reading alone will not assure success. Reading has to have a purpose, be meaningful, and it has to be discussed to insure clarity and some retention.
10. Directed reading is necessary for comprehension.
11. Readability does not take into account the nature and frequency of technical terms or the multiple meaning of known words.

Teachers have to be able to assist all children, regardless of their reading level. To help with this problem, teachers must provide textbooks at all levels of readability, various trade books, different junior news publications, textbook material rewritten by the teacher or by the more able students, experience charts, and study guides, and various audio-visual materials.

Teachers must be willing to use the more able student in assisting the less able student. Teachers cannot handle the job by themselves.

After a review of research, Smith (34) states that skilled presentation of reading skills in the social studies classroom can materially affect the success of the subject matter instruction. Programs for improving teachers' skills have been shown to be successful in improving student learning to a significant degree. She concludes that methods of teaching reading in the social studies classroom should be a part of each school system's in-service training program, and should be provided on school time and at school expense.

None of these suggestions will work by themselves. It will take a combination of several with the teacher playing the most important roll, since the teacher is in the best position to know which will work best in any particular situation.

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